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Less than a decade ago, the Veterans Administration hospital in North Chicago was headed for closure.

Budget cuts and a federal downsizing campaign meant impending doom for the sprawling facility. Local veterans who needed medical care could trek to a similar facility in Chicago, officials said at the time.

Oh, how times change.

With active Navy personnel and appreciative veterans looking on, dignitaries Monday broke ceremonial ground on the latest phase of a \$130 million expansion of the center, one that continues the development of the nation's first VA/Navy medical complex.

The project is the largest collaborative effort between the VA and the Defense Department and promises to be a model for facilities elsewhere, advocates said.

"This truly is a unique endeavor," said Capt. Thomas McGue, commander of the Great Lakes Naval Health Clinic.

The latest effort calls for a new ambulatory care center at the hospital, which is on Green Bay Road at Route 137. First will come a new parking lot, a parking garage and a new hospital entrance on Green Bay Road.

The work is set to be completed in 2010, officials said.

The VA and the nearby Great Lakes Naval Station began integrating medical facilities in 2003 to save money and keep the VA open.

Last year, a new emergency room and surgical center to be staffed by and treat personnel from both agencies opened.

The newest project will further expand medical services for veterans and the Navy. It should end the need to ship patients to other hospitals for certain treatments, and it could lead to an expansion of VA services for veterans who now don't qualify on financial grounds, said Mike Peck, superintendent of the Lake County Veterans Assistance Commission.

"The veterans of Lake County will get the services they deserve," Peck said.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, a proponent of the project and a longtime advocate for the VA and the naval base, said he never imagined the hospital would be expanding as he fought against its closure at the start of this decade.

The expansion is further proof the North Chicago VA will never go away, said Kirk, a Highland Park Republican.

William Mahoney, whose wife is a Vietnam War-era Army veteran and whose dad fought in World War II, said veterans deserve the new facility.

"It's about time," said Mahoney, of Park City. "They fought hard for it."